Jake/Bunton

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tucky. Bunton has long been perceived as fifth or sixth on the "iron" totem pole, behind (in no particular order) Jacobsen, Toro, John Deere, Ransomes and, perhaps, Kubota and National Mower. While close to 90 percent of Bunton revenues are derived from the commercial landscape market, its golf course product line is expected to dovetail nicely with Jake's.

"The way we look at it, Bunton gives us a real nice presence in the commercial market. That's the thrust of the deal," Robson explained. "But they've got a following in the golf marketplace. The superintendent at Shinnecock Hills [GC in Southhampton, N.Y.], Peter Smith, has a lot of Bunton products up there. If your products are good enough to be used at a U.S. Open site, you must have quality products... Bunton is an excellent strategic fit for Jacobsen. In marketing terms, Bunton fills some gaps in the Jacobsen product offering."

The Bunton golf line consists of walking green, triplex green, light, medium and heavyweight fairway mowers, along with hydraulically driven gang mowers and aeration units.

"We view the Jacobsen and Bunton product lines as distinct and separate," Robson continued, "and our plan going into the acquisition was to maintain the product lines and distributions as distinct. We haven't developed strategies for melding identities.

"However, a significant volume of Jacobsen sales are outside the United States. We want to look at enhancing Bunton's distribution outside North America with our existing [Jacobsen] distribution."

Distribution is the key, according to Gary Shampeny, who left The Toro Co. to become Bunton's vice president of sales & marketing in 1992. Shampeny left Bunton in 1995 to oversee turf sales at California Turf, a Toro distributor in Bermuda Dunes, Calif.

"This deal is good for the employees at Bunton, in that it provides the company with the potential for a broader distribution base," Shampeny said. "Distribution is vital to any manufacturer, and broader distribution will definitely help Bunton. It should increase their volume.

"The company should grow, and that will benefit the employees. The people within the organization are good people. They're dedicated to Bunton, dedicated to the product line."

Prior to the sale, Bunton had maintained strategic relationships with several overseas companies, including Hayter in the United Kingdom, and Tsuychia, the Japanese greens mower manufacturer.

"The purpose of this acquisition, of course, was to enhance our presence in the commercial turf and golf markets," explained Jacobsen's Harold Pinto, vice president of sales and marketing worldwide. "Certainly, some of these affiliations or marketing alliances, which Bunton maintained before the deal, offer us an opportunity to grow overseas. We're reviewing these relationships and seeing what we can do together.

"In the U.K., for example, Jacobsen already has some common distribution with Hayter. So this sort of cooperation is certainly nothing new to us."

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Bunton's acquisition contributes to a pair of related trends now evident in the turf industry: the continued consolidation of turf equipment manufacturers and the increasing vulnerability of smaller, family-owned operations.

In the 1980s, Cushman purchased Brouwer and Steiner, only to be purchased — along with Ryan — by Ransomes in 1990. Toro has since acquired Olathe, Lawn Boy, and now Hardie Irrigation (see story page 45). Deere has consistently acquired and sought alliances with smaller companies. Now Jacobsen has absorbed Bunton.

"All this consolidation makes it very hard for small manufacturers, like us, to find distribution," said Stan Kinkead, owner of St. Paul, Minn.-based National Mower, one of the few remaining family-owned "iron" operations in the golf business. "The consolidation is scary, and I don't think it's done."

Shampeny pointed out that large manufacturers are always trying to broaden their bases via internal development or simple acquisition. However, Jacobsen and its competitors are increasingly opting for the latter.

"You wonder how the smaller companies are going to survive as independents," Shampeny said. "You need to invest in product development to stay current in the marketplace and to make sure you're in [emissions] compliance with all the regulatory agencies. How are smaller companies supposed to keep up?

"Another example: To ship abroad, you basically have to have certification to sell within each specific country. Smaller companies will have trouble meeting all those regulations. It's easier for larger companies."

Overseas concerns are important, but competing effectively in the U.S. market, by far the world's largest in terms of golf course and lawn care, continues to drive industry consolidation.

"What seems to be happening," Kinkead opined, "is the large manufacturers want it all. They all want to be full service. On the golf side, it's driven by new golf course construction — the package deals. They all want to be able to supply everything in that initial package."

A brief history of Bunton

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Bunton's purchase by the Jacobsen Division of Textron, closes the final chapter in Bunton's interesting history.

W. Price Bunton Sr. formed Bunton Distributing Co. in 1948 to distribute Goodall rotary mowers. That same year, Ira J. Mitchell, manager of the Cave Hill Cemetery in Louisville, asked Bunton to develop a power trimmer just wide enough to fit between the headstones. Bunton and his sons, Herb and W.P., came up with a successful design, began production and renamed the firm Bunton Co.

In 1954, Mitchell again approached the Buntons, seeking a larger capacity mower that would also be maneuverable. This suggestion led to development of the highly successful Bunton Lawn Lark.

In 1969, Bunton purchased Goodall. In 1991, Bunton was purchased by Larry O'Connell, who served as chief executive officer until Bunton's sale in late September.